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AUTHOR Chesebro, James W.
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ABSTRACT

Political communication appears to be emerging as a theoretical and methodological academic area of research within both speech-communication and political science. Five complimentary approaches to political science (Machiavellian, iconic, ritualistic, confirmational, and dramatistic) may be viewed as a series of variations which emphasize the importance of power and symbols in the communication process. Each approach to political communication may be appropriately viewed as a "cluster" of studies along a continuum from the study of physical force, as depicted in the Machivellian approach, to the study of symbolic enactments, as depicted in the dramatistic approach. (LL)

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THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

James W. Chesebro

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James W. Chesebro

Political interactions have persistently intrigued speech-communication scholars. Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt are the most frequently examined speakers within our discipline. In addition, The Quarterly Journal of Speech legitimatized the study of contemporary political communication in 1948 by commiting itself to the analysis of Presidential campaigns every four years. Furthermore, as the concept of rhetoric began to expand in the 1960s, a massive outpouring of analyses dealt with the civil rights, black power, campus unrest, and anti-war movements. Certainly, L. Patrick Devlin's 1971 book, Contemporary Political Speaking, reflected a concern for political communication.

Yet, it would be singularly inappropriate to believe that our discipline has examined political communication in any complete, serious or scholarly manner. Political communication remains a philosophical, theoretical, and methodological enigma within speech-communication. Our discipline has, in fact, denied the very validity of political communication as a research area. We have tended to perceive rhetoric as distinct and independent from politics. Thonssen, Baird, and Braden articulate this conventional wisdom: "Politics" is not "a branch of rhetoric."[1] In this view, politicians are treated solely as orators rather than executors of power. Likewise, politicians are assessed as intentional manipulators of a particular audience rather than forces altering democratic values and processes. Consequently, symbol-using is not viewed as a raw power altering the basic fabric of society. If critics violate these norms, they are admonished that their essays are "political" rather than "rhetorical" analyses.

However, if we speak of political communication in any theoretical or methodological sense, the distinction between rhetoric and politics is challenged. It should be.

Rhetoric and politics are intimately related. Regardless of how academic departments divide up the pie of human action, a scholar may profitably and usefully unite rhetoric and politics. Rhetoric and politics--when merged--jointly account for significant and pervasive human endeavors. The phrase "political communication" aptly captures this relationship between rhetoric and politics.

There are, however, multiple and varied ways of describing how rhetoric and politics interact. Each of these different conceptions of political communication implicitly asserts a unique view and procedure for studying politics and rhetoric simultaneously. Each of these definitions of political communication thus constitutes a unique theoretical approach used to define and analyze the relationship between rhetoric and politics. Five approaches are considered here. Each approach directly or indirectly defines the relationship between power and symbols and thereby addresses the question: "How do symbols reflect and/or create dominant/subordinate relationships?" I shall both survey and assess these approaches to political communication in this paper.

The Machiavellian Approach

One of the most commonly recognized, pragmatic, and enduring conceptions of politics was provided by Machiavelli in his 1527 manuscript, The Prince. When employed as a base for assessing political communication, we may appropriately entitle this "the Machiavellian approach." In this approach, sources of power are conceived of as existing prior to communicative interactions. Political agents are cast as relatively stable personalities who have predetermined tendencies to function either as the dominant or subordinate member in an interaction. In this view, power is self-generated and self-contained. Symbols are only ornaments or symptoms of the power people possess. Symbols may function for aesthetic purposes or to satisfy other needs, but power itself is held to be distinct from symbol-using and symbolic conceptions. In this regard, Machiavelli suggested that those

holding power are conceived to be powerful because of the force of arms (superior physical strength), tradition or heredity, good fortune, or some special ability.[2] Symbols are, in this view, only a sign of things; symbols are meaningful in politics only if there is an actual phenomenon or power "behind" the symbols. Such an assumption suggests that we might dismiss the import of symbols ultimately dealing only with power itself as force, tradition, heredity, good fortune, or special ability if we are to explain how some people control others to secure their own ends in politics. Bluntly put, this approach holds that the determinant of politics is force (in its many forms), not symbols.

The Machievellian approach to political communication is now explicitly employed in speech-communication. Dochner and Dochner's November 1972 Speech Monographs essay, "A Multivariate Investigation of Machiavellianism and Task Structure in Four-Man Groups," is a common reflection of this approach.[3] Dochner and Dochner divide subjects into two groups, what they call "high" Machiavellians and "low" Machiavellians based upon students' responses on the Mach V test. They then ask how high and low Machs function in small group settings of different types. It is important to note that such a design assumes that high and low Machs exist prior to communicative interactions and are not created as a result of the symbolic interactions within the small groups themselves. Correspondingly, high Machs are thought to possess stable personalities, functioning as manipulators who are "excessively task-oriented and treat others as objects to be controlled rather than individuals with whom they can develop harmonious relationships."[4] These personality traits are treated as enduring and controlling forces determining the way symbols are used.

The basic principles of the Machiavellian approach may also be employed to examine collective political action. In his 1970 QJS essay, for example, Herbert W. Simons offers an analysis of social movements which assumes that leaders exist who "must constantly balance inherently conflicting demands on his position and on

the movement he represents." Such a conception of a social movement assumes, in Simons' words, that "the rhetoric of a movement must follow, in a general way, from the very nature of social movements."[5] In such analyses, symbols are derived from the personalities of leaders. Correspondingly, strategies themselves are often classified by the type of leader who employs them.

The Machiavellian approach requires a critical response. As a theoretical model, the approach tends to perceive power as a one-way force exerted by an agent upon relatively passive coagents, counteragents, and situational variables. Daniel Bell's perspective of social change and control offers an especially relevant, potent but also critical view of this assumption controlling the Machiavellian approach. He observes:

> The problem of any science is to understand the sources of change. And in this respect social science is fairly recent. The great intellectual barrier was that we always thought they knew the sources of change, which were also the sources of power, namely the personal will of kings, lawgivers and prophets, those who governed states, drafted laws, and established or reinforced religious beliefs. But only gradually did men realize that behind these visible sets of acts were such intangible nets as customs, institutions, and cultures, which subtly constrained and set the boundaries of social action. At the same time came the slow realization that there were "social forces" which generated change, whether they be impersonal processes such as demographic pressures (increased size and density of populations), technology, and science, or conscious strivings such as the demands of disadvantaged groups for equality or social mobility.[5]

Failing to account for these complexity of change and control, the Machiavellian approach correspondingly fails to consider the way in which symbols themselves create personalities There is little within the approach, moreover, to explain how symbol-using controls communicative interactions. Quite similarly, the notion that political relationships themselves are basically symbolic relationships is ignored; symbols "size up" situations, selectively "draw forth" relevant and basic structures and outstanding ingredients from an on-going process or reality, and generate attitudes about enacted environments. Ultimately, then, it is often appropriate to observe that symbols create the self-conception

of being the "dominant" or the "subordinate." With some concern, then, we observe that symbols are viewed as a byproduct or tool rather than an actual determinant of power in the Machiavellian approach.

The Iconic Approach

A second approach to political communication, which I would entitle "the iconic approach," holds that symbols have a more important role in politics than implied by the Machiavellian approach. However, power and symbols continue to be viewed as discreet factors. In addition, significant symbols in political communication derive their impact from and are solely a product of force. Symbols thus function as reflections of and cues to understanding physical force. When so narrowly conceived, symbols are more appropriately viewed as icons. In political contexts, icons are pictorial representations of physical force. Correspondingly, rhetorical icons in political communication are pictorial representations of physical force which alter or reinforce the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of those in any dominant/subordinate relationship. Common political icons would generally include military parades, statues of past and present heroes, uniforms, and perhaps even Atom bomb testing insofar as such tests suggest a nation-state would use such instruments as political weapons.

In political contexts, rhetorical icons may function in several ways. They may alert us to the existence of power and its execution. They may function as warning signs or "future shock" messages. They may remind us of the existence of physical force and ultimately may be substituted for the actual use of force during confrontations. By its common meaning, the phrase "iconic approach" even forecasts that an audience is most likely to react to icons on an emotive, subliminal, and uncritical level.

Also, the iconic approach may be used by critics to reveal more inobvious rhetorical forces in politics. Government agencies may function, for example, as rhetorical icons. The creation and very existence of the National Labor Relations Board has led some to believe that labor/management disputes can now be negotiated more reasonably, rationally, and quickly. The very existence of such an agency may lead some to believe that the full force of the federal government regulates economic disputes. The agency--regardless of its actual negotiating success record--may create the belief that a powerful third party negotiator thus controls labor/management disputes. A political strategist of this ilk might spectulate that public anxiety and concern over inflation might be eliminated by simply placing the issue within the jurisdiction of an appropriate agency.

Thus, the iconic approach continues to hold that force is the most potent determinant in political interactions. However, the approach also holds that icons may be used to represent force and thereby reinforce and alter domiant/subordinate relationships. Throughout these analyses remains the sense, then, that symbols have impact only because they are derived from concrete physical forces. Symbols tend to be viewed, in this scheme, as more "artificial" than physical force. Recently, of course, The Prospect of Rhetoric has recommended that rhetorical and communication scholars devote greater attention to icons.[6] The prototypes for such analyses may already exist in several of the rhetorical analyses of radical confrontations, for many of these essays viewed political icons

as suasory efforts.[7]

The Ritualistic Approach

A third view of political communication emphasizes the often redundant and apparently superficial nature of political communication, hence its entitlement as a "ritualistic approach." In this view, politics is cast as a form of symbolic action. Politics is viewed as the manipulation of signs, signs that change attitudes and actions. Sign manipulation may be used to satisfy one's needs at another's expense or to mutually satisfy different sets of needs. However, these manipulations are generally treated in a unique manner by those who hold that political interactions are predominantly rituals. Symbols are viewed as redundant distractions which conceal substantive social problems and issues ultimately precluding the resolution of those problems. Thus, a Presidential campaign may be viewed as a ritual occurring every four years which seldom alters substantive policies. The ritual of the campaign functions rhetorically insofar as it convinces the voters that concrete actions are to be executed as a byproduct of the election outcome. Amitai Etzioni offers a potent critique of the American political system. His assumption is that sign manipulation is predominantly a rhetorical ritual functioning as a substitute for substantive changes in the "real" world. He argues:

> We natives know the Let's-Solve-a-Social-Problem dance all too well. The President usually begins the ritual with a speech. He announces that he is going to slay the evil spirit and that the demon-inflicted plague will vanish. He promises: poverty will be eradicated, or the wave of crime will be turned back, or pollution will be wiped out. After a great fanfare, the elders meet ceremoniously, the President asks Congress to enact a program, and a new agency comes into being. A year or so later, we hear about the new agency's performance. Things often haven't improved; in fact, the original social malady may have worsened....So the shamans prescribe more magic: they may reshuffle the agency and give it a new name and a new chief, or they may change the definition of success.[8]

Etzioni's analysis highlights the rhetorical ritual in order to offer a damning critique. However, the analysis is also descriptive and rhetorical simultaneously.

He implies that rituals themselves (by force of their redundancy if nothing else) attract our attention, and they may ultimately function rhetorically insofar as they lead us to believe that one pattern commonly resolves social problems. At this point, of course, the most impressive consideration of the rhetorical ritual (as a general phenomenon) is provided by Paul Campbell. His book, Rhetoric/Ritual, might well function as a creative, provocative, and serious base for analyses which would deal with political communication as rituals.[9] In addition, a fairly complete and systematic view of the role of rhetorical rituals in political communication is to be found in Murray Edelman's The Symbolic Uses of Politics.[10] Finally, Ernest G. Bormann's analysis of Thomas Eagleton's role in the 1972 Presidential campaign provides an indication of how rhetorical rituals may be profoundly altered in significant ways.[11]

The Confirmational Approach

A fourth approach to political communication, the "confirmational approach," tends to treat political communication as both an expressive and instrumental method for confirming or disconfirming political agents and policies. In this view, a national election may be viewed as an opportunity for people to express discontent, or enthusiasm, or to enjoy a sense of involvement at the national level even though that involvement may not alter bureaucratic behavior or forecast subsequent policy formation. The election may also be examined as a time to reinforce a sense of national identity, and for those within the national government to secure confirmation and reassurance of their continued self-interests. These emotive functions are satisfied by virtue of political communication. In addition, political communication may confirm or disconfirm policy actions. Campaigns draw attention to the importance and reasonableness of accepting public policies that have already been passed or adopted by governments. In this regard, politics is symbolic in the sense that it is a secular religion and often a

substitute for the inability to transform the immediate environment. Thus, the campaign, as a form of political communication, confirms the evolving national identity, policies, and agents within the political process. Political communication, in this case, is both an expressive and instrumental confirmation or disconfirmation of political processes and outcomes.

The confirmational approach to political communication may be used to describe, interpret, and evaluate political actions on all levels of interaction. The political communication process may confirm or disconfirm the image of a local politician, the image associated with the local community itself, as well as the existent local policies. The political communication process may confirm or disconfirm agents, images, and policies at the national level as well. The 1964 Presidential election, then, may be viewed as a confirmation of the agents, policies, and world-view of the "Great Society" while the 1968 Presidential election was apparantly a rejection of this "Great Society." Murray Edelman's 1971 book, Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence,[12] offers both methodological procedures and applied analyses which stem from this confirmational approach to political communication.

The Dramatistic Approach

The final approach to political communication considered here views politics as a totally symbolic creation which is defined, sustained, and controlled by the way in which people use and are used by symbols. This solely symbolic conception of power is appropriately entitled a dramatistic approach given the exacting and insightful conceptions Kenneth Burke has offered of symbolic action under the rubric of "dramatism."[13] Certainly, the basis for a solely symbolic view of power cannot be quickly dismissed. Consider the kind of perspective guiding this approach.

The foundation for viewing power as a solely symbolic relationship is, of

course, grounded in a series of assumptions about the nature of reality, meaning, language, and the individual. As one passes through each of these levels of analysis, one is gradually led to the culminating and relatively unique view of power as a symbolic construct. At each stage, symbols are repeatedly cast as the essential feature creating the basic "humanness" of people. Reality, for example, is cast as a formless and meaningless mass without the defining and interpretive function performed by symbols. Richard Ohmann argues such a position:

> What nature offers to experience...and experience to language is a constant formlessness....Man in his search for perceptual order faces a chaotic world-stuff which gives no hint as to the proper method of sorting.... Just as man is the maker of his own morality,..the choice pictured by modern psychologists has a parallel...the perceiver... shapes the world by choosing from it whichever perceptual forms are most useful to him--though most often the choice is unconscious and inevitable.... H is perceptual sorting, and his choice of perceptual forms largely govern his choice of linguistic categories, but the selections are initially free, in an important sense.[13]

As Burke has put it: "...the vocabulary itself...is a way of sizing up reality."[14] Correspondingly, the meaning of events is defined by the way people respond or react to phenomena. In this view, there is no inherent meanings which are universal or independent of people. Consequently, language acts--verbal and nonverbal--are predominantly significant, because they can transcend the limits of cultures, norms, classes, organizational hierarchies, and personalities ultimately providing the common feature of human beings and social communities. Likewise, in the individual, it is language which unites beliefs and behaviors.

In this context, symbols are viewed as the operational basis for understanding power. Power exists as a force only if others understand certain behaviors to be so. As a symbolic conception, then, power is a relationship between people. While politics remains the pursuit and exercise of power, power refers to the relationship created and sustained by shared perceptions of both the dominant and subordinate components of the relationship. Symbols function as the mediating and defining determinant of such relationships; both the dominant and the subordinate must agree on what symbols constitute and create the power relationship.

A symbolic conception of power, as conceived by many dramatists, is relatively common within political science. Political scientists Irish and Prothro argue, for example, that:

> Power is one of the things we are talking about as a central concern of politics, but it is not something that can be grasped in the physical sense that a monkey can grasp a coconut. Power is not a tangible thing like a coconut that can be thrown from a tree to the ground or from one person to another. Rather, it is a relationship. It can no more exist without someone to respond to the claims of the powerful than it could without someone to assert such claims.[15]

The symbol used to define a particular power relationship tends to control the type of behavior executed by both the dominant and subordinate forces within the relationship. Note, for example, that the black movement has recently sought to alter the contemporary power relationship between white and black. When the movement emerged as the "Civil Rights Movement," the movement sought unity by virtue of an established right of equality and an appeal to "brotherhood." As the strategies and tactics of the black movement evolved, so did the symbolic entitlement of the movement. The "Black Power" movement asserted a distinction between black and white and directly challenged the dominant role of the white community. While such symbolic labels may represent particular behaviors carried out by a movement, the label itself ultimately begins to control how agents will unify and divide, which strategies are to be used toward which ends, and which acts are viewed as consistent or inconsistent with certain environments. The symbol, then, enacts and defines the way in which agents are characterized, acts are perceived, strategies are selected, ends are assessed, and environments are conceived. As we change our controlling symbols, we begin to change the way in which we shall perceive and assess environments. McLuhan has noted, in this context, that "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us." Thus, a dramatistic approach to political communication would view symbols as the defining, mediating, and controlling foundation for understanding the meaning of dominant and subordinate relationships.[16]

Conclusion

Five approaches to political communication are surveyed here. Each approach offers a conception of how symbols and power (rhetoric and politics) are related thereby prescribing that certain types of research questions be examined in certain ways. Certainly, the five approaches allow us to offer multiple reactions to the potential usefulness of each approach. Some may wish to initially disregard one or more approaches immediately, because they are confident of the kinds of research which must be undertaken. Others may respond more carefully, seeking out yet additional implications of each approach. It may be appropriate, however, to note that the five approaches can be viewed as basically complimentary. While we may wish to delineate clearly the objects we examine as rhetorical and communication scholars, political interactions simultaneously reveal Machivellian, iconic, ritualistic, confirmational, and dramatistic dimensions. Moreover, it would appear that each approach to political communication may be more appropriately viewed as a "cluster" of studies along a continuum from the study of physical force as depicted in the Machivellian approach to the study of symbolic enactments as depicted in the dramatistic approach. The approaches may, then, be viewed as a series of variations which would emphasize the importance of power and symbols in mutually defining but relatively different ways. In any of these events, political communication itself appears to be emerging as a theoretical and methodological academic area of research within both speech-communication and political science. While I severely doubt that it will create an interdisciplinary relationship between the two disciplines, it may well function as a stimulus to examine what those in another discipline do and to be more self-conscious of what we do within our discipline.[17]

James W. Chesebro is Assistant Professor, Department of Speech, Temple University.

[1]Lester Thonssen, A. Craig Baird, and Waldo W. Braden, Speech Criticism (1948; rpt. New York: Ronald Press, 1970), p. 555.

[2]Machiavelli, The Prince (New York: Mentor/New American Library, 1952), p. 33.

[3]Arthur P. Dochner and Drenda Dochner, "A Multivariate Investigation of Machiavellianism and Task Structure in Four-Man Groups," Speech Monographs, 39 (November 1972), 277-285.

[4]Dochner and Dochner, 277.

[5]Herbert W. Simons, "Requirements, Problems, and Strategies: A Theory of Persuasion for Social Movements," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 56 (February 1970), 4 and 2. Emphasis added by Simons.

[5]Daniel Bell, "Twelve Modes of Prediction--A Preliminary Sorting of Approaches in the Social Sciences," Daedalus, 93 (Summer 1964), 846.

[6]Committee on the Advancement and Refinement of Rhetorical Criticism, The Prospect of Rhetoric: Report of the National Development Project, Lloyd F. Ditzer and Edwin Black, eds. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1970), p. 220.

[7]See, for example, Edward P. J. Corbett, "The Rhetoric of the Open Hand and the Rhetoric of the Closed Fist," in Dissent: Symbolic Behavior and Rhetorical Strategies, Haig A. Bosmajian, ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1972), pp. 71-83. Rhetorical icons in political communication may also include major agencies of the political socialization process. In this regard, I can conceive the family, school, and mass media as rhetorical icons in political contexts. See: Jack Dennis, Socialization to Politics (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), particularly pp. 321-424; and Richard L. Merritt, "Political Science: An Approach to Human Communication," in Approaches to Human Communication, Richard W. Budd and Brent D. Ruben, eds. (New York: Spartan Books,

1972), pp. 313-333, but particularly p. 327.

[8]Amitai Etzioni, "The Grand Shaman," Psychology Today, 6 (November 1972), 89 and 91.

[9]Paul Newell Campbell, Rhetoric/Ritual: A Study of the Communicative and Aesthetic Dimensions of Language (Belmont, California: Dickenson, 1972).

[10]Murray Edelman, The Symbolic Uses of Politics (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967).

[11]Ernest G. Bormann, "The Eagleton Affair: A Fantasy Theme Analysis," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (April 1973), 143-159.

[12]Murray Edelman, Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal & Quiescence (Chicago: Markham, 1971).

[13]See: Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives and a Rhetoric of Motives (Cleveland: Meridan, 1962).

[13]Richard M. Ohmann, "Prolegomena to the Analysis of Prose Style," in Style in Prose Fiction, ed. by Harold C. Martin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 8 and 9.

[14]Kenneth Burke, Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1957), p. 5.

[15]Marian D. Irish and James W. Prothro, The Politics of American Democracy (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 16.

[16]Multiple examples of dramatistic analyses of political communication exist in speech-communication. For an extended discussion of the symbolic meaning of the black movement, see: Parke G. Burgess, "The Rhetoric of Black Power: A Moral Demand?" Quarterly Journal of Speech, 54 (April 1968), 122-133. Other relevant examples include: Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 56 (April 1970), 109-119; Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (February 1973), 74-86; Leland M. Griffin, "The Rhetorical Structure of the 'New Left' Movement:

Part I," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 50 (Summer 1964), 113-135; Richard Weaver, "Abraham Lincoln and the Argument from Definition," and "Edmund Burke and the Argument from Circumstances," in The Ethics of Rhetoric (Chicago: Gateway/Henry Regnery, 1953), pp. 85-114 and 55-84 respectively; and Theodore Otto Windt, Jr., "The Diatribe: Last Resort for Protest," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 58 (February 1972), 1-14. Also, see: Kenneth Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" in The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1957), pp. 164-189; and Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Others Essays (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1967), pp. 3-40.

[17]An initial framework for such an examination is provided by Stephen L. Wasby, "Rhetoricians and Political Scientists: Some Lines of Converging Interest," The Southern Speech Journal, 36 (Spring 1971), 231-242. An extremely sophisticated application of both the principles of rhetorical theory and political science is provided by Willard A. Mullins, "On the Concept of Ideology in Political Science," The American Political Science Review, 66 (June 1972), 498-510.